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ABSTRACT

A community coalition for middle school reform is a group of individuals who organize to learn more about the education of young adolescents and engage community resources to improve local schools. Each coalition should be geared to the unique needs and strengths of its own school system and community. This booklet describes coalitions in three communities and gives advice drawn from their experiences. In each of the following cities, the school system has received help from the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation in improving middle school education: (1) Louisville (Kentucky); (2) Jackson (Mississippi); and (3) Long Beach (California). As their experiences illustrate, schools with a commitment to middle school reform are likely to incorporate recognition of the distinct developmental and educational needs of young adolescents with a focus on long-term success in education and work. A challenging curriculum combined with high expectations, collaboration and communication between teachers and parents, and a strong commitment to continuing teacher training are also important elements of the middle school reform effort. Examples from the three communities illustrate steps in starting a community coalition. Educating young adolescents should be an urgent priority in all schools. A coalition for middle school reform can bring together the resources needed to advocate for and support the most important goals: high achievement for all students and a firm foundation for their futures. (SLD)

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WORKING TOGETHER

Harnessing Community Resources To Improve Middle Schools

ED 414 352

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by Anne Mackinnon

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http://www.middleweb.com

To learn about developments in middle school education around the country, check this web site for articles about exciting school-based projects, curriculum ideas and lesson plans, notes on new research in education and adolescent development, exemplary student work, government initiatives, funding sources, and other features.

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COMMUNITY SUPPORT FOR BETTER MIDDLE SCHOOLS

In towns and cities around the country, citizens are coming together to support better education for middle school students. Coalitions of parents, businesspeople, educators, and others are pressing for needed reforms, encouraging good teaching, and helping schools raise the level of student achievement. Although the movement is still small, these coalitions are a positive sign for the future of American middle schools, historically one of the most neglected segments of our educational system.

Some middle schools, which typically encompass grades six through eight, are as vibrant as the young adolescents who attend them. For students in those schools, strong community support and constructive advocacy can raise standards of excellence even higher. Elsewhere, for students trapped in mediocre or poor middle schools, community pressure for change may make the difference between success and failure, now and later in life. To quote Winifred Green, organizer of a coalition in Jackson, Mississippi, "Middle school is the last, best chance to grab kids before other forces take hold." No community can afford to miss that chance.

Middle schools *typically span grades six through eight, although some schools include fifth or ninth grades as well. Schools at this level are also sometimes known as intermediate schools.*

Middle school students *are young adolescents, usually between the ages of 11 and 14.*

Education "in the middle" has traditionally received scant attention from either school systems or communities. Many school boards and superintendents know little about the developmental and learning needs of young adolescents, and communities sometimes worry more about students' behavior than about what they are learning. For educators, a community coalition represents an opportunity to dispel misconceptions about middle schools and their students, while also bringing valuable partners into the quest for more rigorous and exciting schools. For people outside education, a coalition can be a tool for learning, while also urging or speeding up the pace of change. Most important, a community coalition offers interested people a forum for sharing ideas about high-quality middle school education and an opportunity to take steps, locally, to get there.

But what is a community coalition for middle school reform? Who gets it started, and how does it operate? A working definition might go like this: a community coalition for middle school reform is a group of individuals (or representatives of organizations) who organize to learn more about the education of young adolescents and engage community resources to improve local schools. Some coalitions have been

started by school administrators or teachers, others by parents, city government officials, youth program coordinators, community activists, or business people. An institutional home within the school system, a community or parent organization, local government, or a college or university is helpful but not essential.

And what does a coalition do? A crisis in the school system—a set of shockingly bad test scores, for example—can be the catalyst for an outpouring of community concern, which in turn can inspire the creation of a coalition. Under these circumstances, the group has a ready-made mission in helping the school system recover and improve. In other places, a coalition has emerged as an integral part of an ambitious larger effort: in Long Beach, California, for example, the middle school coalition fits within a drive to revitalize the local economy, while the coalition in Louisville is helping the school system meet Kentucky's new performance mandates while generally working toward higher academic standards for all middle schools. Most often, though, a coalition grows out of a long-term sense of missed opportunities and unused capacity. Then, the challenge is to figure out who is willing to help, what needs to be done, and what resources are available.

A community coalition for middle school reform *is a group of individuals who organize to learn more about the education of young adolescents and engage community resources to improve local schools. It brings together concerned people from inside and outside the school system. Each coalition should be geared to the unique needs and strengths of its school system and its community.*

The agenda for change may be fairly clear from the start, or it may emerge as the group gets to know its subject better. The coalition's goals may be oriented toward improving the quality of instruction, getting businesses involved with schools (and vice versa), creating a more coherent path from school to work, increasing parent and community involvement, encouraging cooperation between schools and social service agencies, reducing crime and violence, urging equity for all students, or some combination of these. Any goal that benefits middle schools, and which is attained more effectively with outside help, is a good choice. Experience shows that communities can take very different paths with equally significant results.

This booklet describes coalitions in three communities—Louisville, Kentucky; Jackson, Mississippi; and Long Beach, California—along with advice collated from their experiences. In each city, the school system has received help from the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation in improving the education it offers to middle school students, measured in increased academic achievement. To strengthen those reforms, and to learn more about how community engagement can boost school performance, the Foundation

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has also supported the development of community coalitions, each with a broad and inclusive membership.

The people interviewed for these profiles share a deep interest in middle schools and a willingness to get involved. Beyond that, they couldn't be more different from one another. Their combined message is this: whoever you are, in whatever town or city, you can make a difference for middle schools and their students. If reading this booklet makes you think that you have something to offer to your local middle schools, then you're probably right.

EDUCATING YOUNG ADOLESCENTS: MEETING THE CHALLENGE

Middle schools in motion. Over the past two decades, a reform movement has swept the education of young adolescents. Across the country, schools that once called themselves junior high schools have been reorganized into middle (or intermediate) schools. Middle schools typically span grades six through eight, although some schools have included fifth or ninth grades as well.

The creation of middle schools has often been motivated by research showing that young adolescents have distinct developmental needs, which in turn shape their educational needs and abilities. No longer dependent on the structures that characterize elementary education but not yet ready for the independence of high school, students between the ages of 11 and 14 demand something different—something that recognizes and builds on their distinctive strengths.

The "raging hormones" theory. Everyone agrees that early adolescence can be a difficult time. Educators and parents point to young people's rapid physical changes and volatile personalities, their "raging hormones" and mood swings. These are normal symptoms of development at this age, part and parcel of making the transition from childhood to young adulthood. Most of us remember well how hard these years can be, and we sympathize.

Unfortunately, sympathy for young adolescents can be too much of a good thing. In some middle schools, concern for students' emotional and psychological needs overshadows expectations for high achievement. Developmental concerns are important—indeed essential—to effective middle school education, but they must never be allowed to justify a retreat from intellectual rigor, a rich and demanding curriculum, or a belief in students' competence as learners.

High expectations yield high performance. Thanks to a recent trend, high student achievement has jumped to the top of the agenda in many middle schools. Educators are asking how to inject middle schools with content-rich curricula in algebra, social

studies, science, English, and other subjects. As new curricula are developed and adopted, they seem to be producing good results. Teachers are seeing a change in students, who appear to like school more, to be happier and more motivated. Most important, students seem to be leaving middle school with higher levels of skills.

Early adolescence is a time when people have an especially large capacity to learn new and different things. Unfortunately, a lot of educators and parents seem to have a different idea of what kids are capable of at this age.

—*Judy Seal,* Vice President of Education
Long Beach Community Partnership, Long Beach, California

This trend is perhaps most visible in some districts' decision to adopt academic standards. Adopting standards is a difficult choice, and implementing them effectively can be a long and rocky process—both for teachers, who must change their thinking and their daily classroom practice, and for parents and others in the community, who often find the reforms confusing. At their best, standards articulate a school system's expectations for all students; they inspire high levels of achievement while also establishing minimum standards.

Hallmarks Of Middle School Reform

Schools with a commitment to middle school reform are likely to incorporate some or all of these characteristics:

- ❑ Recognition of distinct developmental and educational needs of young adolescents
- ❑ Focus on students' long-term success in education and work
- ❑ Challenging, content-rich curriculum, with interesting themes tying the different subject areas together
- ❑ High expectations for all students, clearly articulated by schools and teachers through standards or other methods
- ❑ Collaboration and communication among teachers and parents
- ❑ Strong commitment to continuous training for teachers and other staff

Once everyone understands the point of standards—to clarify what students should know and be able to do—and how schools intend to implement them, the inherent common sense of the approach begins to shine through. As one parent explained to district officials after a presentation on standards, "I hate to tell you this, but I'm shocked that the schools have been operating without these."

There's such a lot of misunderstanding out there around the issue of standards. By serving as a conduit between the community and the school district, the coalition helps spread accurate messages about what we're doing, and why.

—*Sandra Ledford*, Middle School Advocate
Jefferson County Public Schools, Louisville, Kentucky

Standards are especially important at the middle school level, which has historically received less public, parental, and scholarly attention than have elementary or high schools. Young people who arrive in high school without the skills to acquire information or the discipline to apply themselves may be detoured from the path to success.

Middle schools and the public trust. The public has a right to expect that their school systems will do a good job in preparing young people for productive and satisfying adult lives. Yet an infusion of community support can provide the extra help schools need to fulfill this implicit contract. Such help is important in communities with high-performing and ambitious middle schools; in communities where schools are dragging their feet on reform, that help is essential.

In most towns and cities, school boards monitor student performance, school spending, and a host of other matters. Parents exercise vigilance on behalf of their own children, while working through parent organizations to benefit the larger school community. Even so, middle schools can also gain from a wider network—a network that includes the employers who will someday hire today's students, the colleges that will provide their higher education, the social services providers that work with their families, and other institutions. That network can be mobilized and cultivated through a community coalition for middle school reform.

If you get off course in middle school, nobody will find you in high school. When we get the business community involved, it sends a message to kids that we care about them, their education, and the path they're taking.

—*Cindy Read*, Education Program Coordinator
United Parcel Service, Louisville, Kentucky

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Why Are The Middle School Years So Important?

- ❑ Excellent teaching, challenging subject matter, and positive attitudes on the part of school staff help young adolescents set high standards for themselves and strive for excellence.
- ❑ Young people at this age are defining who they are and how they see themselves in relation to the world. As they pull away from more familiar surroundings (including their families), they need strong, appealing role models and activities to channel their interests.
- ❑ Students need solid preparation for the demands of high school. Those who arrive in high school without that preparation find their prospects for work or education severely compromised.
- ❑ In many communities, middle schools have been virtually ignored. Test scores show that, nationally, children tend to do measurably less well in the middle grades than they did in elementary school.
- ❑ Inequities between high-achieving and low-achieving children can deepen during these years, with lifelong consequences for those left behind.
- ❑ Because they typically spend time each day with several teachers, middle school students are not as well known by any one teacher as they were in elementary school. This creates special challenges for parents and schools as they seek to monitor each student's progress.
- ❑ As young people assume more responsibility for completing their assignments and negotiating school-related problems, parents can lose touch with day-to-day school matters. Many parents are hungry for feedback about how their children are doing but don't know how to get information.

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GOOD FOR SCHOOLS, GOOD FOR THE COMMUNITY

Every community is different. School systems are different from one another, but the contrasts that distinguish one community from the next are even greater. The differences that define communities—demographic, economic, geographic, historic—dictate that coalitions to support middle schools will take different forms and have different goals.

There is no one best way to structure such a coalition, as the composition of successful coalitions proves. In Long Beach, for example, the coalition has a fairly small membership, drawn mainly from the school district and local colleges and universities. In Louisville, where much of the original motivation for the coalition came from city government and social service providers, the group is larger and more diverse.

Most towns, cities, or counties have some distinctive strengths to draw on in establishing a coalition. Colleges and other institutions of higher education have a direct interest in the quality of local schools, and their faculty and staff have expertise that makes them valuable members of a coalition. Social service providers share with the schools a commitment to children and families and a recognition of the challenges institutions face in maintaining morale and professionalism. Some schools are already getting strong support from well-organized, sophisticated parents' organizations—but even where these don't exist, caring parents do. Business people are everywhere, and a majority of them are well aware that the health of business and the health of the community are vitally interconnected. Together, people from each of these groups can contribute to a middle school coalition.

Who Belongs In A Community Coalition?

- ❑ Public and nonprofit service providers
- ❑ Business partners
- ❑ Civic and government leaders
- ❑ Parent leaders
- ❑ School board members
- ❑ School administrators and teachers
- ❑ Professionals in health, law, and other fields
- ❑ Scholars in education and youth development
- ❑ Police and safety officers
- ❑ Clergy

Intelligent innovation is a good thing. In every school, committed and innovative people are working hard every day. Some are lucky enough to be working in systems that are already firmly committed to necessary reform and high student achievement. It is important to remember, though, that even systems that have not embraced a process of improvement still harbor exemplary educators. A coalition can help give them the leverage they need to transform their schools.

A community coalition for middle school reform can accomplish a number of things a school cannot accomplish on its own. Most important perhaps is the coalition's ability to demonstrate to people inside the schools that innovation is visible and valued. When educators realize that they are not operating in a closed universe—that other people are watching and seem to care—all kinds of things begin to happen.

Our principals are very dedicated to the middle school concept. There's a bond between them, which spills over to the teachers and parents in every school.

—*Sandy McCall*, Professional Development Specialist
Jackson Public Schools, Jackson, Mississippi
and Past President, Mississippi Parent-Teacher Associations

Paying attention to balance. People with a fresh viewpoint tend to ask more questions than insiders do, and they're also less defensive about facing up to honest answers. A coalition can help a school system look squarely at patterns of inequity—by school, by neighborhood, by type of student—and develop strategies for addressing them that call on resources beyond those of the schools alone. Similarly, a coalition can help mobilize the school system in support of broader goals, such as economic development, crime control, or community service.

Simply by focusing on middle schools, a coalition takes an important step toward redressing one of the most common and short-sighted imbalances in American society: the historic neglect of the education of young adolescents. When middle school staff members feel ignored (and in most school systems, they do), their energy and commitment are eventually compromised. Visible signs of community interest are especially important for staff, parents, and children in schools where poverty, overcrowding, low student achievement, or other problems have already created a sense of being left out.

Community support multiplies the capacity of the schools. Public education depends on community support, both implicit and explicit. By revitalizing that support and channeling it toward a specific goal—middle school reform—a coalition strengthens the entire system, from kindergarten through high school.

A coalition can build educational capacity by encouraging coordination and a sense of shared mission among all middle

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schools in the community. Middle schools with high standards challenge elementary schools to do better for all children, while also ensuring that students arrive in high school ready to make choices and prepare themselves for further education or work. When middle schools raise the hurdles (by teaching algebra, for example), the rest of the system is forced to respond.

Middle schools can also lead the way to broader reforms simply by opening their doors to input from the community in a visible way. When Louisville's middle schools began implementing a program to make themselves more "customer-friendly" to parents and members of the community, the entire system took notice. Principal Fred Harbison, whose school was the first to meet the new "friendliness" standards, has articulated an important reminder for every public school: "We don't own the schools; the public does."

Let's face it. Secretaries set the tone for the school. If people aren't welcomed when they first enter the school, they have a difficult time feeling good about the school.

—*Susan Shortt*, Coordinator, Middle School Coalition
Jefferson County Public Schools, Louisville, Kentucky

A strong, well-defined initiative captures the attention of middle school parents, giving them a reason to become involved. This produces benefits not only for the children of active parents, but for their classmates as well.

I have two children in middle school, one in sixth grade and one in eighth. It helps them to see me involved with our council. They see that and say, "My mother really cares."

—*Roxane Moncure*, Parent Representative
Council on Reform and Excellence, Jackson, Mississippi

Building community capacity. Although their concern may need to be awakened and directed, most people do care deeply about education. People in business, for example, are well acquainted with the idea that they ought to be contributing to their community. They realize that schools are training their future workforce, that the economic health of their region depends on a strong educational system, that schools can benefit from exposure to private sector attitudes and procedures. But how, exactly, can they get involved? Where is the starting point? A coalition can provide structure for some early steps, which in turn can make later steps easier to imagine and take.

Working together on behalf of middle school reform builds a store of skills, knowledge, interest, and good will among participants, thus making a community better able to mobilize in the face of future problems. When the Jackson, Mississippi, school system was forced to hire its third new superintendent in five years, the local middle school coalition was prepared to step in and help measure candidates' educational credentials

against the needs of the district in a systematic way. Their booklet, "Toward Excellence in Jackson's Middle Schools," articulated goals for students, schools, and the district as a whole and set high standards for the selection process.

It's easy to think, "We're business. We're perfect. You teachers, you're not doing your job." But when we're working closely in partnership with teachers, we see what the challenges really are. It's important to remember that we're all citizens of this community.

—*Cindy Read*, Education Program Coordinator
United Parcel Service, Louisville, Kentucky

Participating in a coalition helps members understand the work educators do each day and the challenges they face over the long term. They learn to see their community's strengths much more clearly, while also recognizing areas where better information, stronger services, or higher standards of performance are needed.

Getting involved in middle school reform puts a community in the midst of an exciting national initiative. A network of forward-looking teachers, scholars, and other practitioners is developing, supported by conferences, workshops, articles, the Internet, and other media. Being part of these important changes can become a source of pride for everyone.

Did we start our coalition because we thought our middle schools were in trouble? Not really. But as social service providers, some of us did see that many of our high-risk kids were having difficulties in school. The coalition has improved the situation for the kids we serve and for their families. It has helped us see the whole picture a lot more clearly.

—*Lynn Rippy*, Director, Youth Services
Department of Community Services, Louisville, Kentucky

BUILDING A COMMUNITY COALITION

Who gets things started? A coalition is fundamentally a collection of people, representing a collection of organizations and interests. At the beginning, though, a coalition begins with a single person, maybe two. That person may be an educator or a business person, a member of a civic group or a parent, a social service provider or staff member at a community organization. Anyone with time and interest can get the ball rolling.

Survey the territory. Even if you know the school system well, it's a good idea to collect some basic information on the current state of local middle schools. Ask the school district for data on student performance, descriptions of special programs at each school, budget reports, and any other materials they offer to the public or parents. Request copies of recent legislation or other state-level initiatives for school improvement. Judy Seal, a parent and former teacher in Long Beach, did research and asked "lots of tough questions" as she explored the options for a middle school coalition. "You need to do

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this," she says, "if you're going to be able to explain the situation to other people."

Collect background information into packets to share with members of your core group; they may have other items to add, as well. If you have difficulty obtaining the materials you need, make a note of the problem: developing better public and parent information may be an area where your coalition, like the one in Jackson, can make an early contribution.

I was afraid the council was just going to be "my thing," but after the first six months people really started to take leadership. I knew we were really a council when the members set the date for the annual forum two years in advance.

—*Winifred Green*, President
Southern Coalition for Educational Equity, Jackson, Mississippi

First Steps In Forming A Community Coalition

- ❑ Enlist a core of interested people.
- ❑ Contact school officials and parent leaders to get information, learn their views on the current state of middle school education, and discuss the potential of a coalition.
- ❑ Learn what middle schools in other parts of the country are doing; a good place to start is with the web site at http://www.middleweb.com.
- ❑ Draft your mission and possible membership.
- ❑ Invite your core group to a meeting to review the mission and membership and suggest possible short-term and long-term activities.
- ❑ Redraft your mission and recruit additional members.
- ❑ Set a tentative agenda.
- ❑ Hold your first meeting and appoint a chair.
- ❑ Announce the formation of the coalition to the press, elected officials, and others.

Finding the right motivation. Shaping the coalition depends on weighing what needs to be done to foster middle school reform and what strengths your community can bring to the task. Solicit advice from the president of a local parent organization, the head of youth services in your city, a principal or school board member, the director of a community organization, a community-minded business leader. Ask each one to help envision a community

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coalition with a clear mandate, sensible parameters, and a coherent course that includes both immediate and long-term goals. Better yet, invite this core group of people to an informal meeting to discuss the possible value of a coalition.

Gathering the ideas of others will suggest possible directions and give you an idea of the type of effort likely to find strong support in your community. Condense the advice you've received into a one-sentence, common sense description, similar to one of these:

- The coalition will work for educational equity for all students, in all middle schools in the district.
- The coalition's goal is to improve the academic achievement of middle school students through the use of the best available teaching methods and materials.
- The coalition will encourage cooperation between middle schools and the business community through projects to help prepare today's students for employment in tomorrow's workforce.

This description will be an important tool for recruiting help, seeking advice, and gathering support. Assume you'll revise it within the first few months, but use it initially to give people something against which to frame their questions and ideas.

Our union is very interested in the education of the next generation of workers. When students come in here and see our members, some of them in their 50s and 60s, sitting at computers in our learning center, they're seeing that education is a lifelong journey.

—*Carl Dowell*, President
United Auto Workers Local 862, Louisville, Kentucky

Locate allies of middle school reform. Your core group can also help identify other people and groups with an interest in education in general, and with middle school improvement in particular. The coalition does not need to include everyone or every interest, only those who genuinely want to improve middle school education and who see the potential value of the group. Your coalition might include five or ten or fifteen people at the outset. The list may change and grow as you refine your goals and begin to take on projects. In Jackson, for example, there weren't many parents or corporate members in the original group, but their numbers increased after the first year.

Also remember that the coalition won't be the only group operating at the intersection of education and the community. The local school board, parent organizations, youth service providers, sports booster groups, job training programs, and even the chamber of commerce all have interests and projects

Early Questions About Local Schools

As a starting point, ask knowledgeable educators and parents to review these questions. Their answers will help you gauge the current situation in your district's middle schools.

- ❑ Is our school system still using junior high schools, or have we reorganized into middle or intermediate schools? If reorganization has occurred, what have been the results?
- ❑ How does student achievement locally compare with achievement levels in the rest of the state? How do our schools stack up against one another?
- ❑ Are the middle schools using innovative ideas and methods? If so, what are they, how did the schools learn about them, and how broadly are they used? Are they helping to improve student achievement?
- ❑ Do our middle schools have the money they need for teachers, materials, support services (such as guidance), and other programs? How does our budget compare with school spending in the rest of the state?
- ❑ Do our middle schools offer special programs, such as leadership development, academic electives, afterschool activities, team and individual sports for girls and boys, or art and music programs? If so, how are these programs funded? Are they accessible to all or most students?
- ❑ Are our local middle school administrators effective managers? Are they leading improvements in teaching and learning? Do they stay in their positions long enough to implement their ideas and see the results?
- ❑ Do our schools have strong parent organizations? Do parents have a role in school governance?
- ❑ Are social service agencies working with our schools? Do they offer services to families through the schools?
- ❑ Is our state supporting school reform and improvement through legislation or special initiatives? If so, how has our school system responded?
- ❑ Does the community support schools in other ways, such as partnerships with companies, arts organizations, or institutions of higher education? If so, does this support touch all schools in the community?

that overlap with the goals of a coalition. Investigate what these groups do, how active they are, and what their contributions have been. Find out what they think of middle schools, and where they'd like to see improvements. Ask them to join the coalition. By understanding their missions and recognizing their accomplishments, your coalition can gain their support without encroaching on their turf.

WORKING WITH THE SCHOOL SYSTEM

Cooperation and independence. Ideally, school leaders will welcome the participation of a community coalition and offer their cooperation and support. Yet a measure of independence from the school system is essential to the coalition's credibility. Improving the quality of education for middle school students sometimes demands putting pressure on the schools themselves—a proposition that makes some educators extremely nervous. To gain and sustain their support, the coalition must make its mission clear from the beginning, and school system leaders need to understand how the coalition will seek to achieve its objectives.

The structure of the coalition's leadership can also help. In Louisville, for example, the coalition is based within the county school system, and its coordinator is a former teacher; yet the coalition's chair is the director of an ambitious youth services program within the office of the mayor. One of the leaders of the Jackson coalition, Ann Jones, is an influential local businesswoman who is also a former school board member.

Service creates credibility. Try to include among the coalition's early goals something tangible that the schools identify as a needed improvement or contribution, but that also brings members of the community into direct contact with the schools. When a coalition in Wichita recruited volunteers to work regularly in the middle schools, for example, skeptical educators saw that they were willing to do the really difficult work of helping children learn. The good will thus generated can serve as the basis for genuine, respectful cooperation between the school system and the coalition, even when the coalition asks tough questions or proposes ambitious reforms.

Students come first. Higher student achievement is a goal that creates an expanse of common ground, where members of a coalition can usually work productively together. In some communities, however, the school system has seriously neglected middle level education, and the achievement of students has languished. Where this is the case, getting the official support of schools may be difficult or impossible—but these are also the places where responsible and creative advocacy for improved middle schools is most vital. Even in these districts, a handful of committed educators will usually welcome the efforts of a coalition and find ways to help.

The rule of thumb, then, is that everyone benefits when community representatives and educators work together to organize and sustain an independent coalition. When this cooperation is not possible, the needs of middle school students are paramount, and citizens should proceed with organizing the coalition, always alert to opportunities to develop positive relationships with school system leaders.

WHAT CAN A COALITION ACCOMPLISH?

Set specific, short-term goals. Any new organization with a broad and compelling mandate faces a dilemma between setting reasonable, short-term goals and narrowing its scope too much at the outset. Testing new collaborations, and not knowing which initiatives are going to be successful, a coalition is tempted to try too many things. Instead, a sensible strategy is to set two or three concrete goals and try to achieve these, while at the same time finding ways to educate your members.

Businesspeople are impatient. They want action. You need to educate them, but they also need something they can do.

—*Cindy Read*, Education Program Coordinator
United Parcel Service, Louisville, Kentucky

Educate yourselves and spread the word. Educating your community about middle school reform creates a common core of understanding, which becomes increasingly valuable as your coalition moves on to more ambitious goals. Jackson's coalition has put a lot of effort into forums that feature presentations by exemplary educators and involve local teachers, students, and parents. "Everyone learns," says Winifred Green, "including members of the coalition."

Some opportunities to learn—a presentation, a newsletter, a web page, a special event—can be designed to address local priorities, while also pointing out how your efforts connect with the national movement for middle school reform. Raising money to send teachers to professional conferences is another eminently "do-able" project, as sponsoring Junior Leagues in Baton Rouge, Wichita, and other cities have shown.

Do something tangible. Try to mix learning projects with practical ones that draw on the knowledge and connections of coalition members outside the educational system: publishing a newsletter, hosting a meeting for business leaders, organizing a career day for middle school students, reviewing school budgets and performance data, recruiting volunteers, helping with grant applications. Catch people for whom schools aren't part of daily life and give them something to do; otherwise, they're likely to drift away or take on other commitments.

Short-Term, "Do-Able" Objectives

- ❑ Publish a newsletter that highlights effective schools, profiles excellent teachers, and explains their importance to students.
- ❑ Host community forums that recognize outstanding educators, spotlight effective teaching methods, and provide opportunities for students to demonstrate what they know and can do.
- ❑ Conduct a survey, and publish the results, on how students and parents experience middle schools and what improvements they recommend.
- ❑ Collect and analyze student performance data from the school system and state, and engage middle school educators in a dialogue about the implications of these data.
- ❑ Support local educators' efforts to learn more about middle school reform by subsidizing their attendance at conferences and meetings.
- ❑ Sponsor small grants or awards for innovative teaching.
- ❑ Organize meetings between school personnel and social service providers to exchange information and ideas.
- ❑ Collaborate with the school system in developing a school volunteer program and publicizing it in the community.
- ❑ Host a meeting for business people about the importance of middle school education, then facilitate connections between schools and interested companies.

Maintaining the agenda. It is not necessary that a coalition produce quantifiable changes right away. It is, however, important to reiterate fundamental principles regularly, to reaffirm the coalition's commitment to improving education for middle school students. It is surprisingly easy to stray from this agenda—as many schools amply demonstrate.

Within the framework of school improvement, the coalition should become an arena for people inside and outside the school system to exchange ideas and clarify expectations. Being exposed to the standards and habits of businesspeople, for example, is healthy for educators; similarly, understanding the constraints within which schools operate helps businesspeople understand that even simple solutions can be difficult to implement. In the long run, different points of view can come together to become an engine for constant, pragmatic school improvement.

An effective coalition can eventually spawn dozens of collaborations and projects. Some of the best ideas and most committed work will probably come from people who work every day in business, government, social services, higher education, or other sectors. At the outset, these people are likely to know very little about middle school education. They need time to learn, and the coalition as a whole needs time to understand its strengths and limitations.

Contributions A Coalition Can Make Over The Long Term

- ❑ Systematically review school board policies to understand how the school system views middle schools and their purpose.
- ❑ Track middle school staffing levels and turnover.
- ❑ Examine broad areas of policy—such as discipline, parental involvement, or academic standards—in a way that pragmatically tests possible improvements against genuine constraints.
- ❑ Foster collaborations between schools and local businesses, colleges, nonprofit organizations, or civic groups.
- ❑ Consider the long-term employment outlook for your community, and how middle schools can help prepare young people for education and jobs.
- ❑ Encourage teacher training that focuses on the special demands of middle school education.
- ❑ Tap into unconventional sources of training for school staff, such as job shadowing for teachers, customer service training for secretaries, or management advice for principals.
- ❑ Develop relationships with reporters and editors to help get accurate information about education to the general public.
- ❑ Raise awareness of the importance of middle school education through presentations at civic and business association meetings and other forums.
- ❑ Encourage cooperation between schools and social service or health agencies.

What Can Business Contribute To Middle School Reform?

We tend to think that a company or organization can contribute only in a way that is related to its particular line of business—that a carpeting company can donate carpeting, for example, or a hospital send nurses to talk about health issues. As valuable as these contributions are, other types of support may be easier for a company to provide, and perhaps even more useful to children and educators.

- ❑ Invite teachers for "job-shadowing" or similar activities to build their awareness of how your company operates, and how highly skilled today's workers need to be. Those real life situations will find their way into teachers' daily lessons.
- ❑ Or to turn things around, send a manager to spend a morning shadowing a principal or classroom teacher. Your company can help overcome the isolation felt by the many talented people who make their careers in our schools.
- ❑ Sharing successful management techniques can also benefit schools. Sensitivity to the customer is an area where businesses have valuable experience. A business with a customer-relations training program can invite school secretaries to learn more about dealing with the public. A company with a good recycling program can share their strategies, or even provide bins and containers.
- ❑ Many middle school students are ready for mentoring or job-related experiences. A well-run, coordinated program can open doors to careers for young people, or simply acquaint them with habits and discipline necessary for being a good employee.
- ❑ Support your own employees in being involved parents. Provide time off or be flexible about work schedules for parents who want to accompany class trips, attend performances, or participate in educational workshops. A union can help work out the details of the plan.
- ❑ Employers can also help workers by providing opportunities—through company newsletters or brown bag lunches—to learn about such topics as choosing a school, helping with homework, or understanding adolescent development. A coalition can help identify speakers and materials.
- ❑ Schools and businesses can also come together around a public service goal: a neighborhood cleanup, for example, or raising money for a community project.

COALITION NUTS AND BOLTS

Who's going to do the work? Although the members will volunteer their time, a paid staff coordinator is essential to the effectiveness of a coalition. The job can be full-time or part-time, but it will require considerable flexibility in terms of scheduling and responsibilities.

The coordinator can be based within a local nonprofit organization (such as a community development association, a youth services agency, or an educational advocacy group), city government, or the school system itself. He or she should be knowledgeable about middle school education and youth issues in general, but there is no particular professional background that is best suited to the work. Energy, resourcefulness, and an ability to work easily with people from a variety of backgrounds are tremendously important.

A paid coordinator is absolutely necessary, or all your work will go by the wayside. People who chair committees work other jobs. They can't give 110 percent of their time, plus go to all the meetings, make all the connections, see all the ideas through.

—*Susan Shortt*, Coordinator, Middle School Coalition
Jefferson County Public Schools, Louisville, Kentucky

In addition to the coordinator, the coalition will need to call on volunteers and other workers to carry out such tasks as stuffing envelopes, making phone calls, and organizing information materials for meetings. Coalition members, school staff, or work study students may be recruited to help on a regular basis or with special projects.

A teacher was here one evening stuffing packets. When I thanked her, she said, "I'm glad to help. Until now, no one in our schools has....asked me to do anything."

—*Winifred Green*, President
Southern Coalition for Educational Equity, Jackson, Mississippi

Space to work and meet. The coalition will need office space and equipment, including furniture, a telephone and computer, and routine supplies. Space may be available in a local middle school, or perhaps in the offices of a local business, religious, or nonprofit organization. The central school district or a college or university may also have office facilities the coalition can use.

A school auditorium, library, or gym is a good place for the coalition's regular meetings. Holding meetings in school facilities helps familiarize coalition members with local schools and their surrounding neighborhoods, while also making the work of the coalition more visible to students, parents, and teachers. You may wish to establish a regular meeting place, or you may choose to rotate meetings among different schools. Above all, think strategically about where and when you meet and how you make the most of your members' time.

Occasionally, the coalition will also need space for committee meetings or special events. Ask your members if they can get access to conference rooms or other facilities at their offices, then make use of as many of them as you can. Make sure your local government officials know what's going on, too, and are given opportunities to help. Any organization that makes a contribution, however small, will be more likely to value the coalition's work in the future.

In building a coalition, go to your chamber of commerce and make a nice presentation. Let the mayor and all your elected officials know what's going on. If they know what you're doing, they'll find ways to help, even if it's not right away.

—*Judy Seal*, Vice President of Education
Long Beach Community Partnership, Long Beach, California

Equipment et cetera. The resources available for equipment and supplies are different in each community, but a plan should be developed to ensure adequate access to phones, computers, copying, and supplies. In-kind donations of routine materials such as paper and envelopes may be extremely helpful, but soliciting these donations can sometimes take up too much of the coordinator's time.

On the other hand, soliciting in-kind donations for special events can stretch the coalition's budget and help firm up the support of the givers. For an evening presentation on algebra instruction, for example, a publisher might donate educational materials, and a local restaurant or grocery store might donate refreshments.

If the coalition is based officially within the school system, find out what regulations apply to donations. Some school districts, for instance, cannot easily accept a gift of used office equipment because of concern over high maintenance costs. Also, school systems may be subject to burdensome purchasing procedures. Avoid these by asking donors to buy what you need and donate the items to the coalition, rather than contributing funds.

Raising money and developing a budget. At least at the beginning, you will probably need to support your coalition entirely from local sources. Identifying and securing other funding may be an early priority of your coordinator, but doing so may take some time.

The coordinator's salary can be paid by the school system, local government, or a community organization. It may be most practical to divide the costs, with the coordinator working as a part-time staff member of an organization with a long-term commitment to middle school improvement. A budget for supplies, mailing, telephone, and other costs can pool donations from other sources, including local businesses.

IT'S WORTH THE EFFORT!

Educating young adolescents should be an urgent priority in every school system and in every community. Some school systems have taken up that challenge, but others have not. A coalition for middle school reform can bring together the resources needed to advocate for and support the most important goals in middle school education: high achievement for all students and a firm foundation for their future as students and productive adults.

Wherever your own community may be in the process of middle school reform, a coalition of local partners increases the capacity of schools to meet these challenges for all children.

Three Community Coalitions

LOUISVILLE, KENTUCKY: MIDDLE SCHOOL COALITION

Strong links to business and social services

A dynamic partnership involving the school system, business, and social service agencies, Louisville's Middle School Coalition got its start in 1993. In that year, Jefferson County Public Schools approached a group of local social service providers for help in designing a plan to extend the school system's work in middle school reform. Lynn Rippy, director of youth services for the city, volunteered for the team that was writing the proposal. "Many of our high-risk kids were having difficulties in school," she recalls. "I hoped it might be a way to improve the situation for them."

The coalition they proposed has grown into a large and inclusive group, with representatives from the public schools, government and nonprofit social service programs, the courts, unions, professional organizations, small and large businesses, and the larger community. Cindy Read, education program coordinator at United Parcel Service, remembers well her first phone call from the coalition's director, asking her to join: "She didn't have to convince me. Working for children in this age group really struck a chord. Also, UPS sees education as a top priority for the future of our workforce and the quality of life in this community."

Together, members of the coalition strive to enlarge community engagement with the schools while increasing students' academic achievement. For its first two years, the coalition operated through five subcommittees: user-friendly schools, social services, parent empowerment, business in the schools, and media support for schools. It recently reorganized into three committees with broader mandates: community engagement, social services, and evaluation (which monitors the effectiveness of all coalition activities). Business meetings are held every other month, with presentations by experts on youth development or education issues scheduled for the months between.

In Louisville, community engagement has truly been viewed as a two-way street. Coalition members have reached out to businesses, while at the same time encouraging schools to take an honest look at how they handle their own "customer relations" tasks of greeting parents and conveying information to the community. "We all need to set standards for ourselves," says Lynn Rippy, who now chairs the coalition. "Schools need to bring themselves into alignment with the business point of view. Parents are like customers, but with an important difference.

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Customers can decide not to do business with a particular company. Parents can't just not go to their child's school."

To urge the schools along, the coalition created the NICE program, a voluntary effort through which middle schools can be certified as user-friendly, or "NICE" schools. (The acronym stands for "Neighborly, Inviting Center of Education.") Each NICE school receives a special banner, and the coalition releases news of the award to the press. According to Susan Shortt, a former teacher and the coalition's staff director, "certification is actually less important than the process of looking at the school through the eyes of the community." This year, Superintendent Stephen Daeschner adapted the NICE program for use in elementary and high schools, as well as the district's central offices.

In a related program, the coalition is tapping the customer-relations expertise of UPS to provide special training for school secretaries—every school's front line in relations with the community. Last summer, UPS invited secretaries from each middle school to attend a version of its phone courtesy training, customized to cover the particular and sometimes delicate situations that arise in the daily life of a school. "The feedback from secretaries was tremendous," recalls Read. "The training gave them new skills and a sense that what they do is seen as important." Since then, UPS has trained another round of secretaries and may maintain the program on an ongoing basis.

UPS has a strong stake in Louisville, where 14,000 employees operate the company's national air hub. Read was hired in 1993, after the company decided to dedicate two staff positions to helping implement the new Kentucky Education Reform Act (KERA). She had worked before that for a small foundation with an interest in fostering business partnerships in education. "We talked a lot then about the need to get involved in systemwide reform," she remembers, "and I bought into that. What I've learned since is that nothing happens if you're not in the classroom. Otherwise, it's just policy and theory. You need a broad vision, of course, but that has to be supported with day-to-day, get-involved, know-people kind of stuff."

Thus, beyond its contribution to the NICE schools project, UPS is also engaged in a close partnership with Williams Middle School. The school and company together won a U.S. Department of Education grant for a school-to-work program that now brings kids into UPS facilities for extended, challenging job-related experiences. One group of students worked with a UPS team on planning the load for an international flight—a process that engaged students' math and logic skills as they decided how to organize the sequence of steps for loading the freight while balancing its weight and

volume. Another worked with the information services division, receiving a short version of the company's regular desktop publishing training, preparing overheads, and getting tips from the UPS public speaking trainer.

Connecting teachers with the tasks and challenges of real workplaces is the goal of another coalition-sponsored program. "We kept asking teachers to use real-life situations in their classrooms," says Susan Shortt, "but most teachers have been working at their own jobs for so long that they've lost touch with other places." To help develop job-related curriculum, Shortt asked teachers to let her know what kinds of jobs they'd be interested in learning more about, then found people who agreed to be shadowed by a teacher for a day during the summer. Through the coalition's network, Shortt found volunteers in a range of professions—chemists, doctors, judges, government officials, bankers, newspaper editors and reporters, architects—and matched them with educators from the city's middle schools.

The coalition also helped establish a relationship between Ford Motor Company and Westport Middle School. Carl Dowell, president of the United Auto Workers local and a member of the coalition, sees the program as an important investment in Louisville's workforce and his own union's future members. "When students come here and really see what we do, they understand what it takes to get and hold a job at a place like Ford," he says. "It's important for them to get an idea of what they're working toward—whether it's an industrial job, a job in a service industry, or something else."

On the social services side, the coalition's contribution has been equally impressive. Most significant has been the group's ability to develop a single referral form for communication between the school system and local social service agencies and the family court. School personnel report all problems—attendance, truancy, parental neglect, and others—on this form, which is routed automatically to the appropriate agencies. Further, each request for services must be dealt with in a timely way, and the school receives a reply within a specified period. Most important, children are getting services faster.

As its next challenge, the coalition is planning a public awareness campaign to publicize standards-based reform. Louisville is committed to raising achievement through academic standards, and the time has come for the public to understand the changes now sweeping the city's school system. Sandra Ledford, who holds the post of middle school advocate in the school district, sees the coalition as a valuable "conduit" between the community and the school district. "Not only do coalition members talk about standards within

their own organizations," she says, "but they help us reach the general public. Here's one example: the coalition printed messages about middle school reform on grocery bags. When people see that, they know something important is going on." In addition to planning a conference for parents that will address standards, the coalition has asked middle school principals to join a speakers' bureau and is lining up engagements with civic and community groups, churches, reporters, and others. They are also supporting a special "Make the Connection" project, which will connect every seventh grader with an adult from the community. Meanwhile, the mayor has agreed to record a series of public service announcements for the radio.

Hopes are high for the campaign, although the coalition's success in attracting media attention has been disappointing in the past. When the first NICE school was certified, for example, the award ceremony got no television coverage. One coalition member jokes: "Maybe we should call the television station and say we've found a gun on one of the kids. Then, when the cameras arrive, we can tell them about the NICE program." Members of the coalition also suffered a crisis of confidence when Kentucky released its first set of test scores since the reform act, and Louisville middle schools did poorly. Lynn Rippy remembers asking herself, "Are there too many things coming at the schools at once?" After that initial reaction, though, she came to a different conclusion: "What the scores really show is how important it is for us to stay focused."

Indeed, many in the coalition and the school system have been impressed and inspired to see how deeply Louisville's residents seem to care about middle school children and their educational success. "So many people take the attitude that it's their business to learn more," says Shortt. "The coalition hasn't by coincidence found the only 40 or 50 people who really care. There are a lot of people who care." About the coalition itself and its three years of hard work, Lynn Rippy reflects: "It's a surprise, I guess, that so many people have hung on. We're gaining trust, we're working together. People have laid things on the table, and that's important for lasting change."

JACKSON, MISSISSIPPI: COUNCIL ON REFORM AND EXCELLENCE

Working together for excellence and equity

Jackson's public schools have had a turbulent history over the years since 1963, when the Mississippi legislature threatened to close the schools rather than desegregate. Race was the explicit topic of that struggle, but according to Winifred Green, president of a local community-based organization, it remains implicit in any discussion of school reform. "Race

pervades everything we talk about," she says, "but after we've answered the access questions, we need to ask, 'How do we achieve excellence and equity in education?' Citizen participation isn't the answer to that question, but it is essential to finding the answer."

In 1994, Green's organization—the Southern Coalition for Educational Equity—joined with the Jackson school system to establish the Council on Reform and Excellence, a community coalition to improve middle school education. H. Ann Jones, a community leader, businesswoman, and member of the local school board, was also interested in the idea. And the time was right. Jackson had a new and dynamic superintendent, Ben Canada, who had begun to restructure the system to create middle schools, rather than traditional junior highs. The Edna McConnell Clark Foundation had been supporting a process of middle school reform in Jackson for several years, and people inside the schools felt it was time to share their message with the wider community.

The Council on Reform and Excellence met for the first time in May 1994. From the start, the members of the council saw that educating themselves—and the Jackson community—about middle schools would be a primary goal. Sandy McCall, a council member and past president of Mississippi's statewide PTA, recalls those early days: "We got started at a time when parents were absolutely petrified that their babies, 6th graders, were being moved from elementary schools into middle schools. The school district provided some meetings to discuss this change, but not enough, because parents were still frightened. The council helped show them that the concern and knowledge were really there—that the schools were going to make it all right for their children."

Since then, many of the group's activities have focused on expanding everyone's working knowledge of what defines an effective middle school, looking both inside their own local system and outside for new ideas. The result has been a council able to advocate steadily for educational improvements, while also weighing in as needed to help resolve crises.

One early crisis was the departure of Ben Canada, who left the Jackson schools to become superintendent in Atlanta. Members of the council took an active role in selecting a new superintendent, then remained involved through his subsequent departure and the appointment of an interim superintendent. When discipline problems prompted Canada's successor to advocate corporal punishment of students, council members responded with an infusion of knowledge: they invited speakers from the Tupelo schools to explain their system's innovative discipline program, involving police

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officers and parents. The council then engaged the superintendent—who attended the session—in an informed discussion of alternative solutions.

Learning has also been the theme of the council's successful community forums, which feature demonstrations (complete with students) by the city's best middle school teachers and presentations by nationally prominent educators. "We hold the forum in the spring, when incoming parents are really concerned about their children moving up to middle school," explains Roxane Moncure, a nurse, student, and parent of two middle school children. The event draws hundreds of parents, teachers, students, professional and business leaders—and anyone else with an interest in seeing what first-class middle school teaching is all about—and ends with a community catfish supper. Another council effort offered a competition for teachers, who were asked to say how they would benefit as educators from attending the National Middle School Association Conference; the winner attended the conference with all expenses paid.

The council itself is made up of people from Jackson's professional and business communities, along with parents and educators. Its members get together frequently for short but fast-paced meetings. "If you want the big boys to participate, you have to meet early in the morning," says Winifred Green. "We meet in the conference room of one of our members. We start at 7:30, and we're through by 9:00. We can't have a midday meeting, although that's what the school people are used to." The council's office is based at the Southern Coalition for Educational Equity, which has continued to provide staff support after completion of the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation grant. Additional resources—space, materials, volunteers—have come as needed from businesses or the school system.

Today, the council can point to several accomplishments, some more concrete than others. Perhaps most important is a new awareness of the special mission of middle schools, an awareness that has spread beyond educators and parents to a constituency that includes some of Jackson's most influential leaders. "When one of our major businesspeople is educated about an issue—a new curriculum, corporal punishment—and can speak knowledgeably, then people listen," explains Winifred Green. That awareness has brought hope that long-term problems, such as inequities between schools in low- and middle-income neighborhoods, can be addressed. Hope, in turn, has attracted the effort of principals and teachers, many of whom are now actively helping with the council's work. The press has shown an interest, too: the local newspaper has run articles and op-ed pieces about middle

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school reform, and members of the council have been interviewed for television news.

Behind these accomplishments lies fidelity to a set of core principles. First, the council has insisted on working toward the goal of improving middle schools, not establishing itself as an institution, a choice that initially made it less threatening than it might have been to the school system. Second, the council has been serious about a strategy of inclusion. This has meant working hard to keep gender, race, and professional status in balance among its members, but also maintaining a determination to act together. Third, the council has clung tightly to the theme of improving the academic achievement of students; this, according to Green, has "put a frame around equity issues that people can understand."

The Council on Reform and Excellence has succeeded in bringing citizen participation to a new and higher level. In schools, among parents, through the press, and in the community at large, more people are now asking the question: "How do we achieve excellence and equity in education?" More important, though, the council is providing opportunities for people to work together to find answers.

LONG BEACH, CALIFORNIA: MIDDLE SCHOOL REFORM INITIATIVE

Education reform builds local economic strength

In Long Beach, California, middle school reform has a defined place within the city's long-term educational goals, which in turn fit within the city's larger strategy of economic revitalization. Coordinating that strategy—and the network of people and institutions contributing to it—is the task of the Long Beach Community Partnership. The Partnership was created in 1995 after economic setbacks forced the city to take a hard look at its own future. Charged with developing innovative, inclusive partnerships across all sectors of the community, the Partnership works in three broad areas: economic development, education, and quality of life. Within education, the Partnership hopes to foster a unified, coherent approach to education, one that allows students to follow a clear course toward higher education and employment and make successful transitions along the way from grade to grade and from level to level.

Ensuring that middle schools are a strong link in the chain is the goal of the Partnership's Middle School Reform Initiative, whose members include people from across the city and its educational system. Through them, the initiative draws on the resources of the Long Beach Unified School District, Long Beach Community College, and California State University,

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Long Beach, to support an ambitious program of school improvement. For example, because many local teachers are trained at Cal State's school of education, the initiative is assisting the university in establishing a middle school teaching credential—thus simultaneously helping to define good middle school teaching methods for local teachers and ensuring a continuing supply of trained educators. When the initiative organized an institute for incoming middle school parents, it recruited speakers on adolescent development, college preparation, and other topics from the faculty of Long Beach Community College and Cal State. Faculty specialists at the college and university have also helped develop curricula for new, more rigorous middle school courses in history, mathematics, science, and language arts.

Judy Seal, the Partnership's vice president of education, sees an important role for the initiative in demonstrating to middle school students something that the school system alone cannot guarantee: "that staying in school really matters, that there will be a place for them in tomorrow's economy." She is hopeful that the recent adoption of mandatory school uniforms—a policy that the initiative endorsed—is sending an important message in return: that dress, behavior, and academic achievement are the intertwined goals of school reform. Kristi Kahl, an initiative member who also coordinates middle school reform for the school district, puts it this way: "Uniforms are showing this community that we are very, very serious about education."

If the message of school uniforms is clear, however, the overall message of middle school reform is not always so readily apparent. Long Beach is a leader in the national movement for standards-based reform, but the schools have had a difficult time conveying their goals to the community as a whole. "We tried middle school reform verbiage with outsiders," recalls Judy Seal, "but they couldn't respond." As a result, the Middle School Reform Initiative has supported the work of the district by going to groups of citizens, business people, parents, and others to explain how reform in general and standards in particular can help individual students achieve at the highest levels. "I make it very personal," says Seal. "My own kids have had problems, and their schools have helped them. When I talk about those things, it makes it easier for other people to hear me." She also thinks the Partnership can help encourage educators as they face the hard job of school reform. "Be positive," she says, "and assume you're preaching to the choir. You need to tell people they're on the right path. Point to the good things."

To reach middle school students directly, the initiative helped design and seek foundation support for the Youth Development and Resource Center, based at Stanford Middle

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School and funded by the Knight Foundation, the California Community Foundation, and Kraft Foods. The center runs academic and recreation programs, field trips, and community involvement activities for more than 1,100 students. Its advisory committee includes many prominent business and community leaders, who have attended events at the school and helped shape its programs. Besides serving students, the center has developed concrete and direct ways to reach out to members of the community and involve them in projects to improve the middle schools.

Seal explains that the center's organizers plan activities for the entire year, then go to businesses and institutions and ask for exactly the support they need. "Spell it out," she says, "and people will help." A job shadowing program with Sears has grown out of this approach, as has a project to supplement the center's staff with education students from Long Beach Community College and Cal State. In the next few years, the initiative aims to expand the program and replicate its components at other local middle schools.

Judy Seal advocates a direct approach and, even in a big city, a small town feeling. She is quick to point out to Long Beach employers that today's middle school students will eventually become their workers, and that a good education system is essential to attracting working families. With the press, she recommends taking the time to understand their perspective and establish a dialogue. "Watch for accuracy," she says, "and when they get it wrong, call them up and tell them."

Middle school reform has a broad agenda, and it can take people time to understand both the scope of the issues and the need for discrete and tangible action. In advocating for change, patience is essential. "Movement is slow," says Kristi Kahl. "We meet once a month. People are busy, so a lot of our members can't even come every month. But as we got to know each other, the connections began to form."

Connections are also forming with other Partnership educational projects, especially efforts to integrate school technology systems, establish a "seamless" interface across different levels of education, and improve school-to-work opportunities for all students. Capitalizing on those connections and tying them together for the educational and economic future of Long Beach is the Partnership's task over the next few years.

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OTHER MIDDLE SCHOOL PUBLICATIONS FROM THE EDNA McCONNELL CLARK FOUNDATION

Believing in Ourselves: Progress and Struggle in Urban Middle School Reform, 1989–1995. By Anne C. Lewis. The third and final report in a series that examines a Foundation-supported education reform initiative implemented in five urban middle school systems: Baltimore, Louisville, Milwaukee, Oakland, and San Diego. 1995

Changing the Odds: Middle School Reform in Progress, 1991–1993. By Anne C. Lewis. The second report in the series on an urban middle school reform initiative in five cities. 1993

Gaining Ground: The Highs and Lows of Urban Middle School Reform, 1989–1991. By Anne C. Lewis. A report on the first two years of the initiative in five cities. 1991

Making It in the Middle: The Why and How of Excellent Schools for Young Urban Adolescents. By Anne C. Lewis. An analysis of the challenges facing urban youth in grades six through nine and a report on efforts to change inner-city schools, curricula, and classroom practices to help students develop skills and self-confidence. 1990

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Anne Mackinnon is a writer and consultant, specializing in education, health, and social issues. She is a parent activist and member of Community School Board 22 in Brooklyn, New York.

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